

Van Cortlandt House



Van Cortlandt Park

City of New York

Historical Sketch
of
The Van Cortlandt House

Prepared for the
Society of the Colonial Dames of
the State of New York

By
Catharine Van Cortlandt Mathews



New York : M cm iii

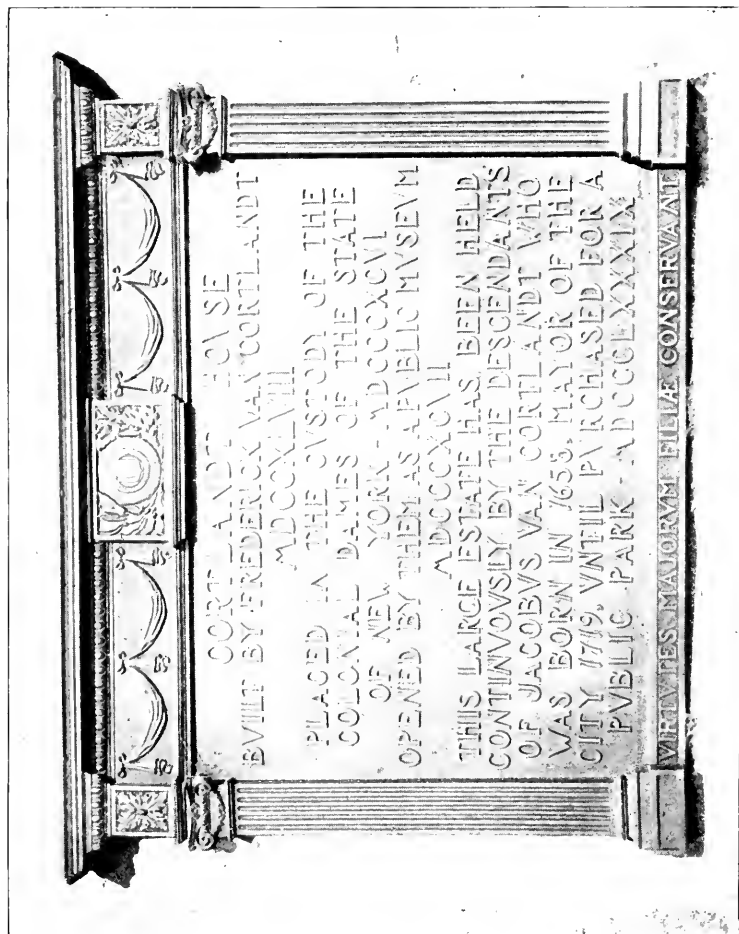
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BRONZE TABLET ON VAN CORTLANDT HOUSE

The Van Cortlandt House

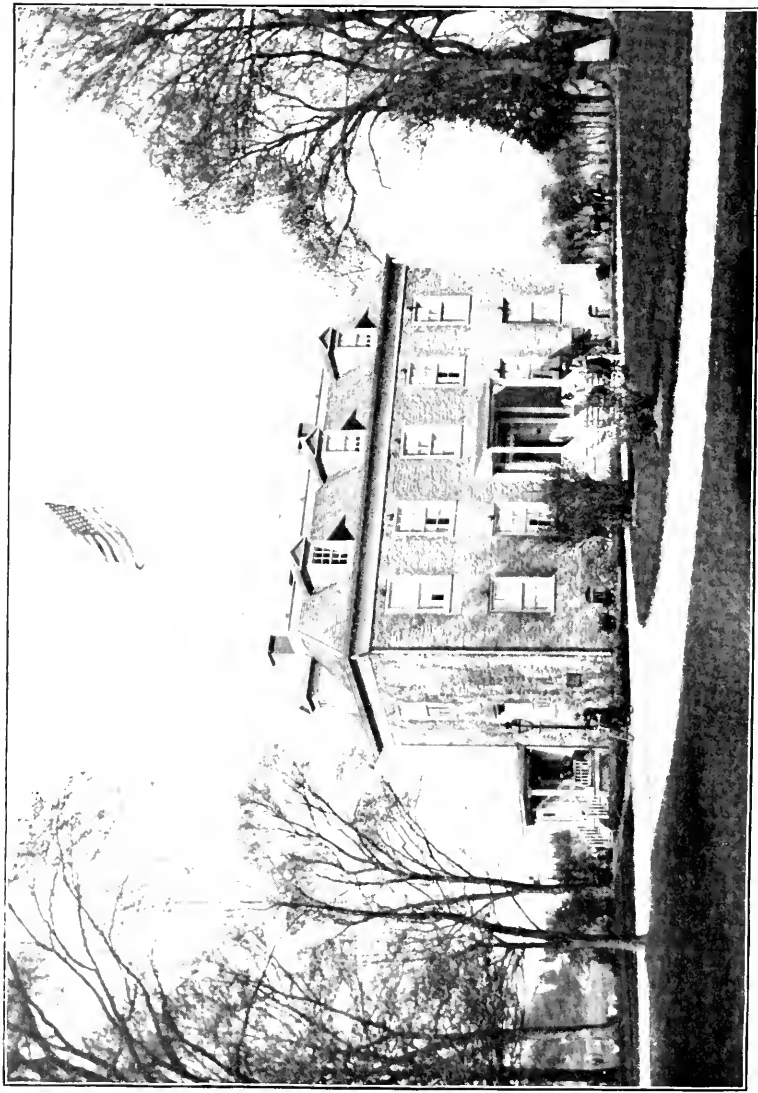
at Van Cortlandt Park, King's Bridge, N. Y., was opened as a Public Museum on May 27, 1897. It is under the management of the Society of Colonial Dames of the State of New York, and was leased to them by the city for a term of twenty-five years. This lease was obtained by a special act of legislature, as the city did not possess the power to give a lease for so long a term of years.

The house is open to the public under the rules governing all public museums, with resident custodians and the police in attendance, and is directly connected with a fire alarm and the nearest police station.

The Society of Colonial Dames has pledged itself to support the house for twenty years longer, but it has proved so attractive to the public, affording as it does unusual interest and the opportunity for both study and amusement, that it is almost certain that at the expiration of the present lease it will still be continued as a museum. Its visitors numbered last year (1902) one hundred and fifty thousand, and the average number of visitors each month is rapidly increasing.

All articles intrusted to the Society of Colonial Dames for exhibition at the Van Cortlandt House should antedate 1776, unless of such especial interest, historically or artistically, as to add to the attraction of the museum, in which case the date may be as late as 1825. The Committee in charge of the house have the responsibility of deciding all such questions; and will give proper receipts to the owners. All articles lent to the house are insured, every possible care is taken of them, and all proper provision made for their safety. The books of index are kept most carefully, and in duplicate, and the transfer of all articles is under especial care.

Van Cortlandt House can be reached from New York by the New York Central from the Grand Central Depot, and by the Sixth Avenue elevated road, which connects at 155th Street with the Putnam Division of the New York Central.



VAN CORTLANDT HOUSE

The Van Cortlandt House

BUILT in 1748, stands upon lands secured, in 1646, by the eminent Adriaen Van der Donck, the first lawyer of the Colony of New Netherlands, as a reward for successfully negotiating an Indian treaty of considerable importance. The situation of the lands and the salt meadows which formed a part of them — “a flat with some convenient meadows about it” — pleased his fancy, bringing to him, as it did, memories of his home in Holland, and a purchase from the Indians, ratified by a grant from Director-General William Kieft, made it his.

He built his *bouwerie*, or farm-house, at the side of the present lake, then a brook, and farmed at his pleasure that plain which lies between it and what is now Broadway, and which extends from the salt meadows of which he spoke to the southerly end of Vault Hill. When he died in 1654, this tract of land passed into the possession of his widow, the daughter of the Reverend Francis Doughty of Maspeth, Long Island. She afterward married Hugh O’Neale of Patuxet, Maryland, and by a new grant, made to herself and her husband in 1666, Van der Donck’s tract became “O’Neale’s Patent.” They in their turn assigned the patent to Mrs. O’Neale’s brother, Elias Doughty, considering themselves unable to manage its affairs properly, from the considerable distance of their Maryland home.

Doughty disposed of the property in various parcels, two thousand acres being purchased in 1668 by William Betts and his son-in-law George Tippetts (who gave his name to the brook known to the Indians as *Mosbulu*), and a tract covering the site of the present Van Cortlandt House was conveyed by Doughty to Thomas Delavall,

Frederick Philipse and Thomas Lewis; Philipse afterward securing the whole from his co-purchasers. This Frederick Philipse, Lord of the Manor of Philipse, extending from the Croton River to Spuyten Duyvil Creek, became in the course of time the richest man in the colony, with an influence strengthened by an alliance with one of its most prominent families. He married Catharine, daughter of Olaf Stevense Van Cortlandt, and as her brother Jacobus Van Cortlandt had already married Frederick Philipse's adopted daughter, Eva, the connection was a double one.

In 1699 Jacobus Van Cortlandt bought from his father-in-law the fifty acres called George's Point. To this he added several hundred acres during his lifetime, and this first purchase, together with the lands he afterward added to it, somewhat increased in acreage as time went on by those who came after him, remained in the sole possession of the Van Cortlandt family until 1889, when it was acquired by the City of New York for the purposes of a public park.

Jacobus Van Cortlandt built himself a house, probably near or upon the site of Van der Donck's old *bouwerie*. He dammed Tippet's Brook to make himself a mill-pond, the present Van Cortlandt Lake, below which a stream finds outlet into Spuyten Duyvil Creek. He built at the side of this mill-pond a saw- and grist-mill, which was in active use for over a hundred years. In the revolution this mill was used by the British and Continentals alike, and surviving to peaceful times was used as a grist-mill until 1889. It was destroyed by lightning in 1901, and one of the mill-stones is preserved and set in the base of the sun-dial in the Dutch garden.

Like most men of the time of his wealth and standing, Jacobus Van Cortlandt adopted methods of living almost patriarchal in their independence of the outside world. Were there buildings to be constructed, his own carpenters and masons could build them and, once built, keep them in repair. Blacksmiths and millwrights, skilled laborers for all needs, were at his command. Flax for the garments was raised upon the farm, and on the place it was

spun and woven. Stock was raised, crops planted and harvested, and over all, indoors and out, was the dominating influence, the watchful direction, of master and mistress.

At his death, he bequeathed to his only son this "his farm, situate, lying and being in a place commonly called and known by the name of *Little or Lower Yonkers*"; and it was this son, Frederick Van Cortlandt, who built, in 1748, the present Van Cortlandt House.

The house is built of rubble stone, with brick set about the windows. Traditionally it is said to be modelled, upon a smaller scale, after the Philipse Manor House at Yonkers. Entirely free from any ostentatious architecture, it yet suggests to a large degree the substantial comfort of the era which it represents. It preserves the influences of past time, and presents within a faithful reproduction of ways and fashions now passed away but increasingly interesting to those who are observant of the evolution of social and domestic affairs as evidenced in the contrasted surroundings of our great-grandfathers and, ourselves.

An odd feature of the house is the peculiar appearance of the window glass, most of which resembles ground glass. This it is not, but was, when placed in the windows, ordinary transparent glass. No satisfactory theory has been presented, even by scientists, of the causes of its disintegration. The box formerly in the garden and the salt water of the creek have been suggested as possible causes, but it must be remembered that many old houses with their glass windows have passed centuries in the proximity of both box borders and salt water, with no consequent chemical change in the glass.

Above the windows on the outer walls are set queer carved stone faces, satyrlike in appearance, and each differing from the other. It is not known whence they were brought, presumably from Holland, where such *corbels* upon the old houses are not uncommon.

Each room in the house as it is at present is furnished with ornaments, furniture, or utensils genuinely old, and in most cases historic, and everything is arranged in strict accordance with the fashions and customs of colonial days.

The high Dutch *stoep*, with its side seats, affords an appropriate setting to the Dutch half-doors by which the main entrance hall is entered.

The Parlor

The parlor is upon the right on entering the main hall, and was intended, as are our modern drawing-rooms, to be a somewhat formal room. Noticeable among its furnishings are the spinet, the round-topped "turn-up table," a tall candle-stand, a writing-desk with a secret drawer, and among the old chairs, of which there are many in the room, is one which belonged to Henry Clay. The brass curtain-holders are curious because of their quaintness. On the walls hang four specimens of the celebrated work of the French artist St. Memin, done in chalk. They are portraits of Governor George Clinton and Mrs. Clinton, of the Honorable Aquila Giles and Mrs. Giles. There is also a large portrait of Robert Livingston (a copy of the original), given by a number of his descendants. Back of the fireplace is a curious wrought-iron piece which has always been in the house; it represents Adam and Eve, the serpent and the tree of knowledge. At the top is seen a phoenix rising from the flames. It is a quaint old bit of symbolism.

The Museum Room

Across the hall from the parlor is the museum room. This room was occupied by General Washington in 1783, and except that it is no longer a bed-room, but is used instead as a museum, it is as it was during his occupancy of it. Like the parlor, it has the deep window-seats that are so suggestive of comfort. The fireplace is surrounded with blue scripture tiles brought from Holland, and the andirons, now there, are a pair which belonged to Benjamin Franklin. At one side of the room are two large wooden vultures, taken from a Spanish privateer in the revolutionary

war, and presented to Augustus Van Cortlandt by Admiral Robert Digby of the British Navy. On the walls hang some old maps of more than usual interest and bearing date 1642. Among the relics displayed are very many possessing rare interest and value. They are too numerous to be separately mentioned, but each is plainly marked and easily seen, as are the contents of the two china closets on either side of the fireplace.

This room is not without a romance, since it was here that the brave young officer Captain Rowe, of the *prusbauk jagers*, was carried when he had been mortally wounded while reconnoitring, and he died here in the arms of his bride elect, who had been hastily summoned from her home by the sad tidings of her lover's fatal wound, and arrived only in time to receive his dying embrace.

The Dining-room

In the dining-room there have gathered, in days past, distinguished guests. Washington and Rochambeau have partaken of its hospitality, and after them came William Henry, Duke of Clarence, afterward King William IV, together with Admiral Digby, who later sent to his host the two wooden vultures now in the museum room.

The visits of men prominent in many walks of life were more than frequent, and the dining-room has memories which have helped to make the hospitality of the house a tradition.

The small closet built in at the side of the mantel was a feature of many Colonial houses, used, it is probable, as a receptacle for many a delicacy, especially when the cold winters made the warm store closet, even if tiny, a decided convenience. The large white cupboard set across the corner of the room holds a store of old china, much of it priceless, and at one side of the room is an immense platter made in the Azores from designs taken from New England, and a pewter platter from the Franklin house in Franklin Square used by General Washington in 1789 as the Presidential Mansion.

A dinner-table of generous proportion and a table which belonged to John Alden are also among the furniture of this room.

The Kitchen

The kitchen, perhaps, takes us back into the past more completely than any other part of the house, since it differs so widely from any of the domestic arrangements of to-day.

The huge fireplace with its surrounding caldrons, pone pots and brazing kettles, the long-handled shovels, the curiously patterned waffle-irons, the long *pele* for drawing out the hot pans of bread or cake from the brick oven built in at the side of the hearth, all speak of other times. At one side of the room is a dresser filled with old pewter, and near the hearth stands a three-cornered china closet. Under the window opposite is a wide old-fashioned settle, and over the mantel are hung a flint-lock gun, a rifle cut down to a shorter length, and the accompanying powder horn.

Almost every utensil used in old-fashioned cookery has been obtained by either gift or loan for the kitchen, and there may be noticed beside the unusually numerous array of pots and pans, etc., many quaint articles less often seen. A tin mould for making candles, a spice-grinder, a board for making New Year's cakes, a curious old lamp with reflectors, which was used in an illumination in honor of George IV, and many other things of varying interest combine to render for the kitchen a charm which appeals to most of its visitors.

The cellar, near it, has hand-hewn oaken beams, broadly substantial. On the west side are two openings, evidently intended for loop-holes, and it is presumed that *all* the windows were originally used for purposes of musketry defence. The cellar contained, it is not doubted, good store of Madeira and port of the famous brands of that day, even to that Madeira which, because it was buried during the revolution, was known, as long as it lasted, as the "Resurrection Madeira."

When the brick oven in the kitchen was being cleaned out some years ago, a number of bottles of old metheglin were brought to light, much incrustated with ashes. Had they been empty, it would have excited no remark, but being full, the question was raised, though it has remained unanswered, as to who could have been so absent-minded as to forget the hiding-place of a beverage so dear to our great-grandfathers.

The word "metheglin" is derived from two Welsh words meaning "wine" and "splendid," and it is made of fermented honey, herbs, and spices.

The Bed-rooms

The southwest bed-room contains the bed in which General Washington slept; it has been moved there from the room below. There is also in this room a chair which belonged to him and which still has the same covering as when it was in use at Mount Vernon.

An unusual article of furniture is a mahogany rest for a gouty foot; it calls to mind pictures of old gentlemen with a suffering limb stiffly extended before them. Beside the bed are bed-steps, very necessary accompaniments of the high four-post bedsteads. On the mantel is a curious carved clock, and there are many old chests and chairs in the room worthy of notice.

Across the hall is the east bed-room, containing, among other things, an old mahogany linen chest, a *kas* or press made in 1650, a quaint cradle studded with brass nails, and bearing the date (in nail-heads) 1734. A toy cradle and table are miniatures of the furniture of the elders. A yellow painted chair, plain and unimposing, belonged to Daniel Webster, and a chair with a reading-rest at one side is one which was owned by Israel Putnam.

The Spinning-room

The spinning-room, back of the east bed-room, has a collection of spinning-wheels, reels, hatchets, etc., and is

devoted principally to the products of needle craft. The samplers, framed and hanging on the walls, are worthy of study, and in the two cases are specimens of handiwork which are of a unique interest. Especially noteworthy is a Cheshire quilt 125 years old, which depicts, in needlework, farm scenes realistically rendered: a milkmaid going to work, children, laborers, and dogs; even houses and trees figure upon it.

In the hall, just outside the spinning-room, are narrow oaken stairs with hand-hewn banisters and a twisted landing indicative of Dutch thrift of space. They lead to the old wine-room on the third floor.

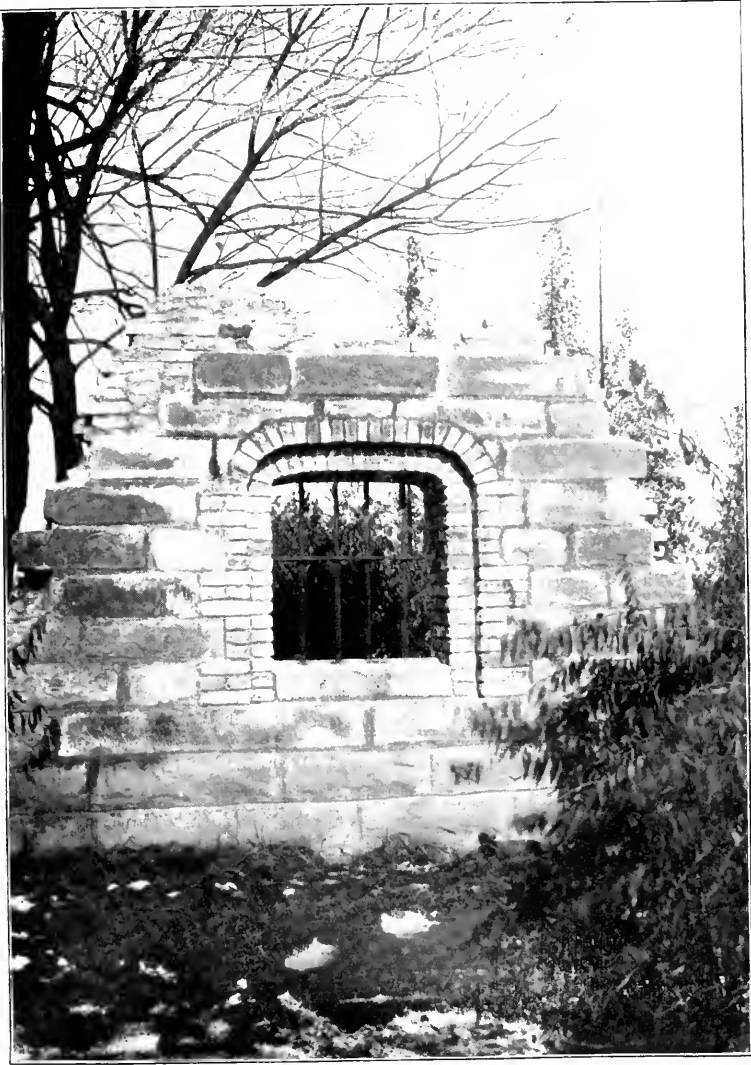
The Dutch Garden

In front of the house the turf and the old trees are as they were; beyond them and below the terrace a Dutch Garden has been laid out and planted, closely following, in its formal precision of arrangement, the style of the old Dutch gardens. This garden was made at the request of the Colonial Dames and has been carried to its present perfection by the persevering energy and the taste of Mr. John C. Eustis, appointed Park Commissioner for the Bronx in 1901.

The Sugar-house Window

At the east side of the house stands a window from the old Sugar-house Prison. This historic window, with the surrounding section of wall, was presented to the Colonial Dames by T. J. Oakley Rhineland, Esq.

It was taken from the old warehouse on Duane Street, built in 1763 for the storage of sugar brought from the West Indies, and which was at the time of its erection the largest building of its kind in the city; its importance is indicated by the coins and parchment manuscript found in its cornerstone when it was torn down in 1892 to make way for a modern building.



SUGAR HOUSE WINDOW

In 1776, during the occupancy of New York City by the British, like all the large buildings and most of the churches, it was pressed into service as a prison for American soldiers. Five stories in height, its massive walls, small windows, and low ceilings made it only too fit a building for the use made necessary for it by the fortunes of war. Some idea of the existing conditions of these persons may be gained by remembering what was declared true of the prison ship "Jersey" which was in the same year anchored in the East River. It is said that the prisoners upon it were so crowded that, at night, the sleepers were all obliged to turn at one and the same moment, and at the word of command!

The cell, from which the window now at Van Cortlandt was taken, was evidently one of importance. It was on the ground tier and of peculiarly strong construction. The stones, iron bars, and bricks were all numbered as they were removed, and now occupy exactly the same relative position as when they formed a part of the building itself.

Between the stones and bricks of the prison were found coins, rude implements, and weapons, concealed, it is probable, by prisoners who awaited a chance to escape, and waited in vain. Brave men they were, and their deaths from disease, hunger, and want, are no less glorious than the deaths of those who fell in battle. The name of Cunningham, English Provost Marshal of New York from 1776 to 1783, is closely associated with the sufferings of the unfortunate men kept prisoners in the Sugar House and other prison buildings; it also appears in history with that of Nathan Hale, whose last hours were embittered by the hostility of his jailer.

On either side of the prison window stand two old guns, found on the site of the American Fort Independence and lent to the Colonial Dames by William O. Giles, Esq.

To the north of the Van Cortlandt House rises Vault Hill, on whose summit is the family vault of the Van Cortlandts. It was on this hill that General Washington, in 1781, ordered camp-fires to be lit, in order that the

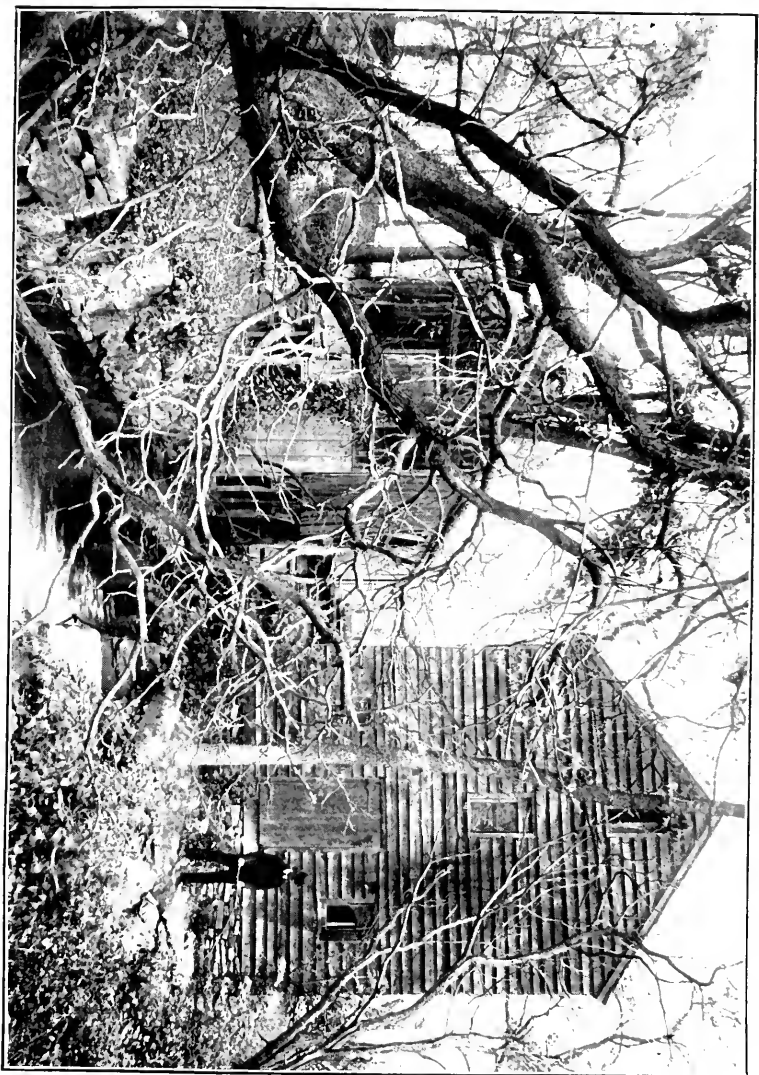
British then occupying New York, as far north as King's Bridge, might be deceived into thinking his forces were still there, while in reality he had withdrawn them to join Lafayette at Yorktown.

The valley lying between Vault Hill and King's Bridge was the scene of almost constant skirmishing during the revolution, and in turning up the present parade ground, the cannon-balls and bullets, the fragments of bayonets, and the many other broken and rusted implements of warfare all spoke eloquently of the long and bloody struggle maintained there by the two armies.

At the beginning of the revolutionary war, General Washington visited King's Bridge, and "esteeming it a pass of the utmost importance in order to keep open communication with the country," he ordered several places which he had noticed as well calculated for defence to be fortified. This was done, eight defences being established at or near King's Bridge. In October, 1776, when Washington withdrew the American troops from Manhattan Island to White Plains, the British advanced their northern line to King's Bridge and occupied the American works there, including Fort Independence on Tetard's Hill, which the gallant General Heath made a dashing if ineffectual attempt to retake in January, 1777, and where were dug up the two guns which flank the Sugar House window.

At this time a picket-guard of Hessians, the green *yagers*, were garrisoned in the Van Cortlandt House. From the British "barrier" at King's Bridge, north to the Croton River extended the Neutral Ground, and the country immediately surrounding the house was the scene of constant military activity. Here were the camps of the *yagers*, mounted and foot, of Emmerick's *chasseurs* and Simcoe's rangers, and the numerous attempts of the American forces to recapture their posts occasioned many a smart skirmish, where the British troops were often engaged by the American light cavalry. The ravages of the irregular bands of "Cowboys" and "Skinners" were by no means infrequent in the neighborhood.

Here, too, was the scene of the massacre of the Stock-



THE OLD MILL

bridge Indians who fought so well upon the American side, and here in the "Indian Field" were buried, in one unmarked grave, the bodies of the slain Indians. They were engaged on the morning of August 31, 1778, by Emmerick's chasseurs, and by Tarleton, leading the Legion Dragoons. Colonel Simcoe, hearing the smart firing of the Indians, moved his rangers rapidly upon the left flank of the Indians, thus surprising them. The Indians fought gallantly but against tremendous odds, and were finally forced to flee, nearly forty of them being killed or severely wounded. Colonel Simcoe was wounded in this engagement, which is one of the most noted in the warfare of the Neutral Ground.

Surprise and defence, attack and repulse, held the surrounding country in a state of disquiet and desolation until the winter of 1782-83, when the British troops were withdrawn to New York, the people returned to their homes, or the ruins of them, and on the 12th of November, 1783, General Washington, after spending the night at the Van Cortlandt House, rode victorious, over King's Bridge.

The history of the country adjacent to the Van Cortlandt House, which can be but so lightly and inadequately touched upon here, is bright with many an incident showing the bravery of the American patriot troops, and, antedating them, it is rich in memories and traditions of those other brave and sturdy men who *made* the Colonies for whose independence the soldiers of the revolution fought; and the Van Cortlandt House, with the relics it preserves within it revives many a bit of history and teaches many a lesson of patriotism.¹

¹ Scharf's "History of Westchester County" and Bolton's "History of Westchester County" are the two authorities from which the historical facts of the preceding sketch have been taken.

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